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# THE LEGITIMACY OF THE CLOSET-DRAMA.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

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A PROFESSOR of English literature at Yale, to whom we are indebted for a valuable study of the rise of Romanticism in England in the eighteenth century, recently published a paper entitled "Retrospects of the Drama." To a small group of his readers the most striking of his assertions is his declaration that "the closet drama is a quite legitimate product of literary art," and that "the playhouse has no monopoly of the dramatic form." And one of this small group cannot resist the temptation to take this declaration as a text, and to ask whether it is well founded or not. Is the so-called closet-drama really legitimate?

To a large majority of the students of English literature, this inquiry will probably seem impertinent. To them the assertion of the legitimacy of the closet-drama is merely the statement of an indisputable fact; and they did not need the arguments and the illustrations by means of which Professor Beers has sought to establish his contention. But there is a growing minority of students of the drama, who will feel themselves moved to sharp dissent, and who will totally reject the assertion that "the playhouse has no monopoly of the dramatic form."

They are prepared to maintain that this statement reveals a misunderstanding of the essential principles of the drama, a misunderstanding which seems to them little short of monstrous. They believe that the playhouse has now, has had in the past and must always have a monopoly of the dramatic form. They cannot recognize the legitimacy of a play which is not intended to be played. They know that the great dramatist of every period when the drama has flourished has always planned his plays for performance in the theatre of his own time, by the actors of his

own time and before the spectators of his own time. And they feel a strong desire to analyze closely the arguments which Professor Beers adduces to sustain the legitimacy of that closet-drama which they abhor as a bastard pretender to the dramatic crown, and which they reject as the offspring of the unwillingness, or the inability, of certain poets to acquire the craft of the theatre,—the special craft which makes the dramatist what he is.

It was the acute Pascal who said that half of the art of writing consisted in the precision of the definitions; and, therefore, it is best to begin by asking ourselves what a closet-drama is. Probably no one of its admirers would dispute a definition to the effect that it is a play not intended to be played. It is a poem in dialogue,—conceived with no thought of the actual theatre. It is a poem in dialogue,—a piece of literature, pure and simple, not contaminated by any subservience to the playhouse, the players or the playgoers. It is wrought solely for the reader in the library, without any regard for the demands of possible spectators in the auditorium. Its essence is to be sought in the obvious fact that the poet who essays it is firm in the conviction that “the playhouse has no monopoly of the dramatic form.” Sometimes, indeed, the poet has gone so far as to declare his deliberate desire so to shape his work that its performance in the theatre would be absolutely impossible. Byron, for one, not only disregarded any playhouse, he violently rejected it in advance. Swinburne, it is true, seems to have thrust aside the theatre of his own time and yet to have believed that his dramatic poems might have been performed in the semi-mediæval playhouse of three centuries ago. But, when all is said, we can rest on the definition that the closet-drama is specifically intended for the closet itself, for the library and not for the stage. It is something which has assumed the outer form of a play, but which is emphatically not to be performed in a theatre.

With the acceptance of this definition we are in a position to consider Professor Beers’s assertion that “the English closet-drama of the nineteenth century is an important body of literature, of higher intellectual value than all the stage-plays produced in England during the same period.” This assertion might be justified without proving the legitimacy of the closet-drama. Many poets have wasted their time and ours on the so-called “pastoral”; and most of them have left us only empty arti-

ficialities. Perhaps a later criticism will hold the closet-drama to be as unsatisfactory as the pastoral is now seen to be. Professor Beers likes the closet-drama, and thinks that there is no need of enumerating its "triumphs"; and then he cites Byron's "Manfred," Landor's "Gebir," George Eliot's "Spanish Gypsy," Horne's "Orion," Beddoes's "Death's Jest-Book," Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna," Tennyson's "Becket," Browning's "Pippa Passes" and Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon." Of course, it is only by a slip of Professor Beers's memory that we find in this list "Orion," Horne's famous "farthing epic."

As we read this catalogue we can see the advantage of a preliminary definition. Several of these dramatic poems cannot fairly be included in any enumeration of the "triumphs" of the closet-drama, because they stand outside the definition. These subtractions from the catalogue of closet-dramas, when this is strictly defined, fall into two classes. First, we may consider the group represented by Tennyson's "Becket." If a closet-drama is a dramatic poem not intended to be played, then "Becket" is not a closet-drama, for Tennyson did intend it to be played. And Tennyson was not the author of a single closet-drama, since he meant all his plays to be acted and was even intensely anxious that they should be seen in the theatre, revealing his readiness to make whatsoever modifications, suppression or additions the managers might suggest to him. That they met with little success on the stage itself is beside the point; this can be accounted for either by asserting that the laureate was without the dramaturgic faculty or by admitting that he did not take the trouble to master the necessary technic of the theatre. What is true of Tennyson is true of Browning, at least so far as "Strafford" and "A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'" are concerned; these dramas were written not only to be acted, but to be acted by one particular actor. And as Browning had Macready in view, so Shelley had Miss O'Neill in view when he wrote the "Cenci." Coleridge composed "Remorse" to be performed, and it was performed, just as Johnson wrote "Irene" to be performed as it was performed. All of Tennyson's plays, most of Browning's, as well as Shelley's and Coleridge's, are therefore not fairly to be enumerated as triumphs of the closet-drama. They are the failures of the playhouse or the rejected of the theatre. Their authors were not originally thinking only of the solitary reader in the library; they had in

mind the massed spectators of the auditorium. All of them longed for the actual theatre. They were all eager for the ordeal by fire before the footlights.

There can be no question that plays of this first class, intended for the playhouse, even if they never reached actual performance, and still more when they failed to achieve success on the stage, are to be excluded from any consideration of the closet-drama. In fact, they are properly to be rated among the stage-plays of whose intellectual value Professor Beers has expressed a low opinion. And when they are deducted, any catalogue of the triumphs of the closet-drama must seem sadly shrunken. How many of the poems which are lumped together in Professor Beers's list were actually composed without some vague, faint hope that perhaps some day a fit stage might present itself for their performance? George Eliot, for example, wrote the "Spanish Gypsy" after she had formed her infelicitous connection with Lewes, a dramatist himself and a critic of the acted drama. Did she write for the reader only, without any remotest expectation that some day her poem in dialogue might also move an audience in the theatre? Did Longfellow know that the "Spanish Student" was unactable? He was glad enough to have the "Masque of Pandora" set to music and performed in the theatre before an actual audience.

While there can be no doubt as to the propriety of striking out from the category of the closet-drama a host of dramatic poems which belong to this first group, there may be a question as to the fairness of deducting those which belong to a second group. And yet the dramatic poems of this other class can be considered as closet-dramas only by stretching the definition. This second group includes Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" and Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon," and all the other imitations of Greek tragedy. The most obvious characteristics of these attempts to resuscitate a departed form is to be found in the fact that they are deliberate imitations. They are exercises in poetry to be ranked with the anatomies of the old painters. They are *pastiches*, as the French call them; and the poet has found his chief interest in recalling the flavor of a day that has gone forever. Although they contain not a little dialogue, they have scarcely more than the husk of the drama, since the Greek poets upon whom these English poets have chosen to model themselves, were

not always and of necessity dramatic. We need to remember that in Greece the drama belonged to a very early type, when the purely dramatic had been only imperfectly differentiated from the lyric and the epic. Greek tragedy had been slowly evolved out of the chorus, and it retained to the end abundant survivals from its earlier state. In *Æschylus*, and even in *Sophocles*, lyric and epic elements are often almost as important as the dramatic element.

It needs to be said also that these English imitations of Greek tragedy, delightful as they are to the expert, are of interest only to the chosen few. They are totally devoid of that broad appeal to the public as a whole which is ever the essential quality of all real drama. They are poetic exercises, no more and no less; and they may reveal the range of the metrical artist's accomplishment and his ingenuity in grappling with the endless difficulties of a resuscitation which can never be really successful, since it is frankly impossible for a modern poet to put himself back into the skin of a Greek of old, and to strip himself of all the accretions of thought and feeling that he has inherited from the long centuries separating him from the Athenians. "*Atalanta in Calydon*" may be the most Greek of all English imitations of Attic tragedy; but none the less is it intensely modern and intensely English. It is not by imitations, however adroit and however skilful, that a poet can establish his fame, even though an imitation or two may serve to broaden our appreciation of his craftsmanship.

Lowell was considering Swinburne's "*Atalanta in Calydon*" when he declared that "every attempt at reproducing a bygone excellence by external imitation of it, or even by applying the rules which analytic criticism has formulated from the study of it, has resulted in producing the artificial, not the artistic." And in the same essay there is another passage which also demands quotation here: "The higher kinds of literature, the only kinds that live on, because they had life at the start, are not the fabric of scholarship, of criticism, diligently studying and as diligently copying the best models, but are much rather born of some genetic principle in the character of the people and the age that produces them."

When we strike out of the enumeration of the triumphs of the closet-drama the imitations of Greek drama and also the plays

intended to be acted, even if they failed of performance or failed on performance, the catalogue is seen to be curtailed; but we cannot deny that it still contains examples of weight, Byron's and Landor's and Swinburne's. If, however, we examine these remaining examples, and if we ask ourselves whether they are remembered for their own sake or chiefly because they were written by poets who have won fame by other works, we discover that these closet-dramas have really contributed very little to the reputation of their authors. We recall "*Gebir*" solely because it was written by Landor, and we do not remember Landor primarily as the author of "*Gebir*." George Eliot does not hold her position in the history of English literature because she composed the "*Spanish Gypsy*." Of all the millions who have taken Longfellow's lyrics to heart, there are very few who are even aware that he wrote "*Christus, a Mystery*."

Perhaps it is hardly too much to say that we might blot out of existence the closet-drama which Professor Beers admires as "an important body of literature" of high intellectual value, without greatly impairing the renown of the English poets who have condescended to the poem in dialogue. No doubt Byron would suffer, more or less, from the loss of "*Manfred*," and Swinburne would be the poorer for the disappearance of the *Mary Stuart* trilogy; but the rest of them would lose very little. Their reputation would be as solidly buttressed, without these closet-dramas, as it is with them. And to say this, to suggest that these dramatic poems are negligible, that they have not called forth their authors' fullest powers, that they are only the surplusage of the poets' fame, that they shine mainly by the glory reflected from the other works of their makers,—to say this is to pose the vital question whether the closet-drama is really worth while.

One reason why the closet-drama fails to justify itself is because it is too easy. Nothing is more stimulating to the artist than the necessity of grappling with difficulty. Then and then only is he forced to put forth his whole strength. To make his work easier in any way, to relax the bonds, to let down the bars,—this is not to help the artist; it is to hinder him from lofty achievement. As Huxley once said, it is when a man can do as he pleases that his troubles begin. A strong nature is ever anxious for a wrestle with an opposing force; and he knows very well

how the strain braces his muscles. An acute French critic, M. Paul Stapfer, once explained that "the instinct which leads us to measure a part of our esteem for a work of art by the effort it has cost, and by the difficulty vanquished, is not unsound, since it is founded on the fact that true beauty is a pearl of great price, hidden at the bottom of the sea, and out of the reach of those who lack courage to struggle for it."

There is a significant passage in Professor Beers's essay in which he sets forth what he conceives to be the advantages of the writers of closet-dramas when they are contrasted with the playwrights who plan their work for the actual theatre:

"As the closet-dramatist is not bound to consider the practical exigencies of the theatre, to consult the prejudices of the manager or the spectators, fill the pockets of the company, or provide a rôle for a star performer, he has, in many ways, a freer hand than the professional playwright. He need not sacrifice truth of character and probability of plot to the need of highly accentuated situations. He does not have to consider whether a speech is too long, too ornate in diction, too deeply thoughtful for recitation by an actor. If the action lags at certain points let it lag. In short, as the aim of the closet-dramatist is other than the playwright's, so his methods may be independent."

Almost every advantage which Professor Beers here claims for the writer of the closet-drama is in reality a disadvantage. The more willingly a poet avails himself of these licenses, the more remote must the result be from the true drama, as Shakespeare and Molière conceived it, with their careful adjustment of their characters to the actors of their own companies and with their keen interest in the takings at the door. The poet stands revealed as a shrinking weakling when he wants to cast off the shackles that all the supreme dramatists have worn lightly. There seems to be a suggestion of wilful perversity in Byron and in Swinburne when they claim the stakes, although they have disdained to play the game according to the rules accepted unhesitatingly by Sophocles and Calderon, by Racine and Hugo. Professor Beers asserts that the aim of the closet-dramatist is other than that of the playwright and that his methods are independent; and in all fairness the conclusion ought to follow that his achievement is not drama, whatever else it may be. If the writers of the closet-drama choose to profit by all the privileges Professor Beers has granted to them,—as most of them have done in advance of his permission,—then they display themselves



as anarchists in art; and the result of their easy self-amusement presents itself as the product of unskilled labor, unwilling to learn the trade.

In the dedicatory epistle to his collected poems Swinburne tells us that, when he writes plays, "it is with a view to their being acted at the Globe, the Red Bull or the Blackfriars,"—the semi-mediæval playhouses with which the Elizabethan playwrights had to be content, since they knew no other, and to the conditions of which they carefully conformed their plays. And in discussing his own "*Marino Faliero*" Swinburne asserts that his dramatic poem, "hopelessly impossible as it is from the point of view of modern stagecraft, could hardly have been found too untheatrical, too utterly given over to thought without action, by the audience which endured and applauded Chapman's eloquence—the fervid and inexhaustible declamation which was offered and accepted as a substitute for study of character and interest of action, when his two finest plays, if plays they can be called, found favor with an incredibly intelligent and an inconceivably tolerant audience."

The first comment to be made upon this characteristic declaration is that we do not now know whether Chapman's plays did or did not find favor with Elizabethan playgoers; and the second is that these playgoers may have tolerated the eloquence and the declamation for the sake of the violently melodramatic plots which held the plays together. A third comment would be to deny incredible intelligence to the audiences of Chapman's time and place; M. Jusserand has made this plain; and no one is in a better position to know it than Mr. Swinburne himself after his devoted study of the Elizabethan dramatists. And a fourth would point out that eloquence belongs to the oration and not to the drama, and that the proper place for declamation is the platform and not the stage, which expects—and has a right to expect—the "interest of action" and the "study of character."

But there is really little need of comment, since Mr. Swinburne's sentence reveals a total inability to understand the drama as that has been understood by all the really dramatic poets from Sophocles to Ibsen, and by all the real dramatic critics from Aristotle to Lessing. It is true that Sidney, who had been infected by the sterile theoretic criticism of the Italian renaissance, believed that the English dramatists ought to model themselves on the great Greeks; and yet Mr. Swinburne himself has never

found fault with Shakespeare for rejecting this advice and for adjusting his plays to the actual theatre of his own time, just as Æschylus and Sophocles had done in theirs and just as Hugo and Ibsen were to do. It is curious that Mr. Swinburne, whose adoration for Hugo is almost as perfervid as his admiration for Shakespeare, did not follow their example. Shakespeare was satisfied with the stage as he found it, semi-mediæval and unworthy of his genius as it may seem to us. Hugo, who had perhaps little more of the native dramaturgic gift than Mr. Swinburne himself, went to school to the professional playwrights whose melodramas were popular in his youth and absorbed their processes. The poet of "Hernani" was no closet-dramatist; his aim was that of the professional playwrights, and his methods were not independent of theirs. He took over the skeleton of melodramatic action which they had devised to please the multitude, and he flung over it the splendor of his lyric verse, with the result of evoking from Mr. Swinburne the assertion that he was a dramatist of "the race and lineage of Shakespeare."

It is curious also that Mr. Swinburne, in his study of French literature, has not observed that the foremost critics of France have never a good word for the closet-drama, perhaps because the closet-drama has never tempted the French poets, who have always contented themselves with the theatre as it happened to exist when they took up the art of the dramatist. Rostand has found his profit in writing for the stage as it is; and even Musset, who turned his back on it for a season, composed his poetic fantasies so closely in accord with its conditions that they needed very little modification when they were transferred from the library to the theatre.

In Great Britain and in the United States in the nineteenth century, while these closet-dramas were being published, there was no scarcity of actors capable of performing characters loftily conceived; and these actors were, many of them, eager for new parts worthy of their histrionic ability. And the continued popularity of Shakespeare's plays in the theatre proves also that there was no lack of audiences ready to welcome new poetic dramas, if only these novelties resembled the plays of Shakespeare in being dramatic as well as poetic. There is no reason to suppose that the poets of the English language would have failed in the play-house any more than the poets of the French language failed,

if these English poets had followed the example of Hugo and of Rostand and had taken the time and the trouble needful to master the methods of the contemporary theatre. But this is what they were not willing to do; they shrank from the toil; and therefore they cannot now claim the guerdon due only to that successful conquest of difficulty which sustains the masterpieces of every art. They chose the easier path, and they wrote poems in dialogue, devoid of the essential qualities of the drama, even if rich in the essential qualities of poetry. What right have they now to the same laurel we bestow on Hugo and on Rostand? They deliberately refused the test of performance by actors in a theatre and before an audience,—the final test which every true dramatic poet has accepted joyfully. It is almost as though they had composed music with no understanding of the several instruments which make up the modern orchestra, and with no intention that the composition should ever be heard. This may be legitimate, although we may suspect a blot in the 'scutcheon. There are no laws to forbid men from wasting their energies; but acts not illegal do not thereby deserve commendation.

It is a significant fact in the history of literature that the closet-drama has appeared only when there is a divorce between literature and the theatre. It is first seen in Rome under Nero, when the stage was given over to vulgar and violent spectacle; and so Seneca seems to have polished his plays solely for recitation by an elocutionist. It is visible again in Italy, when men of letters, enamored of the noble severity of Greek tragedy and of the artistic propriety of Latin comedy, despised the ruder sacred-representations and the lively but acrobatic comedy-of-masks, which were the only types of drama then popular on the stage; and they therefore attempted empty imitations of the classic dramatists with no regard to the conditions of the contemporary theatre. It emerges again in England early in the nineteenth century, when adaptations of Kotzebue, and later of Scribe and his cloud of collaborators, were the chief staple of the stage, and when the overwhelming vogue of the Waverley novels drew the attention of authors away from the drama to the novel, which was easier to write, easier to bring before the public and more likely to bring in an adequate reward. Behind every appearance of the closet-drama we can discover a latent contempt for the actual theatre, and a desire to claim its rewards

without the trouble of mastering its methods or the risk of facing its perils.

This is why the closet-drama never appears in any period of affluent dramatic productivity, for then the poets who happen also to be dramatists are glad to study out the secrets of theatrical technic and to affront the dangers of actual performance. The closet-drama seems to be possible only when men of letters look down on the theatre of their own time. This was not the case in Athens when Æschylus and Sophocles and Euripides were producing plays in competition. It was not the case in Madrid when Lope de Vega and Calderon were vying in the effort to please the Spaniards. Nor was it the case in London when Marlowe and Shakespeare and Massinger were keeping the players supplied with plays which delighted the burly Elizabethans and which still delight us to-day.. No more was it the case in Paris when Molière followed Corneille and preceded Racine, each of them giving the best he had to sustain and amuse his contemporaries.

Even if there was some slight excuse for the appearance of the closet-drama in Rome under Nero and in Italy during the Renaissance, there was none for its revival in England in the nineteenth century, when actors and audiences were alike waiting to recognize and to reward a new dramatic poet. For its continued existence in the twentieth century there is still less excuse, since Ibsen has shown us how the austere themes may be treated in the modern theatre. The poet of our time has no right now to despise the stage, where Shakespeare and Ibsen are gladly accepted; he has no right lazily to refuse to comply with its conditions, if he wishes to win its rewards. And it is the duty of criticism to withhold its complaisant approval. The drama is not for the library, but for the theatre; and it is not for the joy of the little group of dilettantes, but for the stimulation of the public as a whole. It was the wise Boileau who once said that, "Even when a work is approved by a small number of connoisseurs, if it is not filled with a certain pleasure for the general taste of men, it will never pass for good, and at the end the connoisseurs themselves will admit that they were at fault in giving it their approbation."

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